

A Call to Higher Living

That parable we heard earlier, of the rich fool who builds new barns and thinks only of himself, is as pertinent today as it was when Jesus first told it 2,000 years ago. It deals exactly with how we are when we're focused only on our human nature. It was the same sort of thing Christians were wrestling with a little over 500 years ago, when a German monk named Martin Luther nailed *The Ninety-Five Theses* to the Church door in Wittenberg. That act, while small at the time, sparked a movement that would become the Protestant Reformation.

It turned out not to be so much about church politics or doctrine, though those topics were addressed, it was more about the need to reorient our lives toward Christ. In our epistolary lesson this morning, from Colossians 3:1-11, Paul's words echo the same call to reorient our lives. "Set your minds on things above," (verse 2), he says. He's not denying the life we live on earth, but rather, he's calling us to focus on where our real identity and hope lie. If you have your Bible, or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Colossians 3:1-11. **Read Col. 3:1-11.**

Raised with Christ

Paul gives us a blueprint for how we should live down here, in light of the Gospel – guided by the same truths that drove the Reformers to recenter the Church on Christ. Paul opens by telling us, "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God," (Col. 3:1). He's picking up where we left off last week – in Christ's crucifixion we die with Him. We see this most clearly in the Sacrament of Baptism – submerged in the water, dying to the old life of sin with Christ, just as He was laid in the empty tomb. And then rising with Him to a new life. We rise out of the waters of Baptism a new creature, a child of God now, adopted by what Christ has done for us.

So Paul starts by talking about resurrection. He means current resurrection – not something that will happen some day in the far off future. Friends, if you know and love Jesus Christ, you have been raised. You're already living a resurrected life – or you should be. The truth is, as Christians, we live in the power of Christ's finished work.

The Reformers of the 16th century emphasized that salvation isn't a future reward earned by merit – it's a present reality received by grace. In Latin, the language of the Church in those days, the Reformers said "sola gratia" – grace alone – declares that we have been raised because of what Jesus has done, not because of anything we have done. So what do we do with such a gift? Paul tells us, "Set your hearts on things above." If we're raised with Christ, then we have a new center of gravity, or a new orbit

of love. Our affections are drawn upward – not inward. Life's no longer about performance. It's about presence – the presence of Christ at the right hand of God!

Set Your Minds

“Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things,” Paul says. Paul takes us from the heart to the mind. Following Jesus isn't only an emotional experience. It's also a renewed way of thinking.

At its core, the Reformation was a battle for the mind. Luther and Calvin insisted that Scripture was the standard of truth. In those days, popes issued decrees, the Church followed ritualistic traditions, and bought and sold indulgences – they had ordinary people convinced that if they wanted forgiveness for their sins, they had to pay vast sums of money to the Church to be prayed over and pardoned by the pope. So, the Reformers, using Latin again, came up with “Sola Scriptura” – Scripture alone – to call the people to set their minds on the word of God.

Paul's telling us the same thing. Train your mind to seek what is eternal. Let your thoughts be shaped by Heaven's perspective. This doesn't mean that we ignore the world around us. It means we interpret the world through the lens of Christ's kingdom. When we set our minds on things above, we start seeing life differently. Our values shift. Our desires change. And our priorities reorder themselves under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Hidden with Christ in God

Paul goes on. “For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God,” (verse 3). This may be one of the most beautifully simplistic verses to describe the life of a Christian. We have died. Not physically, but spiritually – to the old self. And now, our new life is hidden in Christ.

The Reformers fought against a system that said salvation was transactional. Five hundred years ago, that's what the Church believed. People could earn God's favor through penance, worshiping and praying to relics and icons, or practicing rituals. I've been reading some books in this Course of Study class on the Reformation, and in some cases, the priests didn't even know Latin, so they would just stand up in front of their congregations and mumble some mumbo-jumbo gibberish, hold up the Communion elements, and everyone thought it was a great thing.

The Reformers rediscovered Paul's message – we are united with Christ by faith. Our lives are no longer our own. “Sola fide” – faith alone – reminds us that what matters isn't what we bring, but Whom we trust. When we're hidden in Christ, we're safe. We're secure, and we're sealed in Him. Nothing can take the relationship with Him away from us. The world may not see our true worth, but God does! Because when He looks at us – He sees Jesus. We're covered in the precious blood of the Lamb!

We Will Be Like Him

Paul goes on. “When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you will appear with Him in glory,” (verse 4). Jesus Christ isn’t just our Savior. When we decide to follow Him, He becomes our very life. As followers of Jesus, He can’t just be some add-on, good luck charm type thing for our existence. He’s the Source, and reaching Him – to see Him face-to-face – should be our goal. Paul states it best elsewhere, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain,” (Phi. 1:21).

Our Protestant Reformation forebearers – there were women involved in the Reformation along with the men – re-centered the Christian faith on Christ alone, or as they said it again in Latin, “Solus Christus.” Christ – not Mary, not the saints, not the Church – is the One who mediates between God and humanity. Only Jesus can do that. Paul tells us here. Jesus Christ isn’t just the Giver of life – He is life.

And some day He’s coming back! When He returns, we too will be revealed for who we really are. It’s like the hymn writer said, “Some glad morning when this life is o’er, I’ll fly away. To a home on God’s celestial shore, I’ll fly away... Just a few more weary days and then I’ll fly away. To a land where joy shall never end, I’ll fly away.” Our glory as Christians doesn’t come from earthly success. It comes in union with the risen and returning Lord!

Kill It

Next, Paul gives us some good, practical directions. He says, “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry,” (Col. 3:5). Since we’ve been raised with Christ, we must put to death anything that is unworthy of Him in our lives. The Gospel isn’t just about us receiving grace and new life – it’s also about what we leave behind when we become the new creation.

Paul lists sins that warp our souls. Sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed. Remember the rich fool that Jesus talked about? Here he is! There are a lot of people who minimize the complexity of these sins, and try to turn them into minor character flaws. Friends, these sins are enemies of resurrection living. We have to “kill it” from our lives.

The Reformers taught that the life of a Christian involves a continual dying to sin. Think of it as daily repentance. In fact, Martin Luther’s first thesis says, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘Repent,’ He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”¹ Let’s be clear here. Killing sin isn’t about us earning God’s love.

We can’t earn God’s love. He’s already freely given it to us. He shows us that at the cross. It’s about removing what blocks us from experiencing His love. And we have to do it with urgency and resolve that come from knowing Christ is our life. In a nutshell, Jesus Christ should be everything to us.

¹

Henry Bettenson & Chris Maunder, Editors. *Documents of the Christian Church, 4th Edition*. (Oxford: University Press, 2011), page 197.

God's Wrath is Coming

Next, Paul talks about the penalty for the sins he's just listed. He says, "Because of these, the wrath of God is coming," (verse 6). Now, we don't usually like hearing that. It's tough to hear, but it's a necessary warning. Sin damages us, individually, it impacts other people around us – and most of all – it offends the holiness of Almighty God.

The Reformers understood that the problem of sin wasn't that it made them feel bad – Jan Huss, a Czech priest who had similar ideas to Luther who was burned at the stake by the Church roughly a hundred years before Luther posted *The Ninety-Five Theses* spent a small fortune on indulgences trying to buy forgiveness and free himself from guilt, but couldn't. The problem with sin is that it separates us from our holy God. The Reformers rejected the idea that sin could be balanced with good deeds or paid off through buying indulgences – certificates of pardon written and signed by the pope.

Paul tells us plainly – God's judgment is real. That's why grace is so precious. The Gospel isn't good news because we're lovable – it's good news because God shows us He is merciful. His wrath is coming, but in Jesus Christ we are shielded from it – we're hidden in Him. Again, because we've been washed in the blood of the Lamb!

Not Who We Used to Be

Look what he says next. "You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived," (verse 7). Paul reminds the Colossians – and us – of who we used to be. I want to make this plain here. He doesn't say this to shame us. Sometimes as Christians we get bad cases of plank-eye, where we want to point out all the flaws we see in others, rather than dealing with our own stuff. Paul mentions the past because we should be celebrating the transformation that grace brings. We should be glad we aren't the people we used to be!

The Reformers insisted that salvation changes a person. John Calvin, a famous preacher and teacher in Geneva, spoke of regeneration – the idea that faith must result in a new walk. We're not saved by works, but we are saved for works. In other words, because of the grace God has shown us, in gratitude, we do things to show His love towards others – even when they don't deserve it.

The Gospel then isn't simply a legal declaration, it turns us in a new direction. To follow Jesus is to walk a different path than the one we once knew. And every step forward is a step away from those things which once held us captive. It's like another statement Jesus made in the Gospel, about the wide road which leads to destruction, and the narrow road which leads to life, (Matt. 7:13-14, paraphrased).

Get Rid of Relational Sins

Next, Paul moves from the sensual sins to relational sins. He says, "But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips," (Col. 3:8). While emphasizing correct doctrine, the Protestant Reformation also emphasized personal and communal holiness. True reformation begins in the heart and shows itself in how we treat others.

Speaking of personal and communal holiness, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, once said:

Solitary religion is not to be found. 'Holy Solitaries' is a phrase no more consistent with the Gospel than Holy Adulterers. The Gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness. Faith working by love, is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection.²

The tongue reveals the heart. We may not think it, but what we say matters. If we're to be raised with Christ, then our speech should reflect His grace, mercy, and peace. The attitudes and words Paul lists aren't fitting for those who bear the image of God and wear the name of Christ.

Off with the Old, On with the New

He goes on, "Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator," (verses 9-10). The old self – the person we were before Christ – is defined by deception, manipulation, and self-preservation. The new self is defined by truth, transparency, and love. The word Paul uses here for "taking off," and "putting on," in Greek is the same word we would use to refer to clothing. Taking off old rags, and putting on beautiful, brand new threads.

The ancient Church really honed in on this during the Easter vigil. In those days, new Christians were baptized over night on Saturday night leading into Easter morning. Churches throughout Europe have separate buildings used for Baptisms. The new Christians would be separated males from females, go into the chapel containing the Baptismal font, which was a pool in the floor. They would be stripped naked, immersed in the water – buried with Christ – and then rise out of the water with Him, and dressed in brand new white robes. They would then lead the procession for the early Easter service into the cathedrals and receive the Sacrament of Communion for the first time in their lives.

The Reformation was a call back to truth. It rejected layers of distortion within the Church and called people to walk in the light of God's word. Similarly, Paul calls us to a life of integrity – we're to be a people who speak truth because we belong to the Truth. Being a Christian is an on-going process of renewal – not changing behaviors – it's authentic spiritual transformation.

We're being remade, reshaped, reformed into better image bearers of Christ. This is on-going sanctification, a theme the Reformers deeply understood. Though they differed on the pace and nature of that renewal, they agreed that the Christian life must involve growth in grace. "We are not yet what we shall be," (1 Jn. 3:2). But every day, by the Spirit, we are becoming more and more like Jesus – more loving, more truthful, more holy.

Christ Is All and Is In All

Paul closes our passage this morning saying, “Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all,” (Col 3:11). This verse shatters every worldly barrier – ethnic, cultural, religious, and social. In Christ, there is no hierarchy, no favoritism, no division. He IS all, and He IS in all. One of the great legacies of the Protestant Reformation is the idea of the priesthood of all believers.

No longer was access to God limited to clergy or mediated through saints. Every person, no matter their background, was invited to know Christ directly. Paul’s words this morning echo this truth. It’s been said that the ground is level at the foot of the cross. Christ unites what the world divides. His Church is one body, made up of many members – all of whom are equally loved by Him, and equally valued by Him. He’s the Head.

The message of our passage this morning is clear and compelling. Since you have been raised with Christ –

- Set your heart on things above.
- Set your mind on the things of God.
- Put to death the old ways.
- Put on the new self.
- Live like those who belong to Heaven – even while you walk on earth.

This was the heartbeat of the Protestant Reformation – to re-center the Church on Christ, to call people back to Scripture, to live by grace through faith, and to give all glory to God. So let us not set our minds on those things which pass away, but on Eternal Truth – Jesus Christ. Let us live not like the people who have conformed to this world, but as those transformed by the renewing of our minds!

Prayer: Gracious God, You have raised us with Christ and hidden our lives in Him. Help us to set our minds on things above, to put to death what belongs to our earthly nature, and to walk in the new life You have given us. Renew us daily in Your Image, and unite us as one people under Christ, who is all and in all. Amen.